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Castro's 'Rights' Policy

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By John B. Oakes

HAVANA — Fidel Castro reputedly has one of the most efficient security-police systems extant. Yet he is said to change his sleeping quarters every night.

"For 20 years," he explained in a recent five-hour interview in his headquarters here, "the C.I.A. has been preparing attempts against my life — and it still is. Maybe there was

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an exception during the Carter Administration. Carter wasn't the kind to plan another man's murder, but this Administration has begun again."

Questioned about his own record on human rights, Castro explosively offers his special version of recent Cuban history. "Ours was the cleanest of all revolutions," he insists. "Not one priest was taken to the wall; not one prisoner was murdered."

Omitting all reference to the drum-head executions and savage prison sentences of the early days, Castro does admit to the existence of hundreds of "counter-revolutionaries" still serving long terms. Among them are the "plantados," or intransigents, who were originally with him, turned against him and who reportedly receive especially severe ill treatment — which Castro furiously denies. Nor does he speak of the steady trickle of political prisoners of recent years, jailed for ridiculing the regime in cartoons and pamphlets or

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vaguely "defaming" the revolution.

However, it is not President Castro but President Reagan who for four years has blocked a group of several hundred released political prisoners from entering the United States despite a long-standing American commitment to ease the way. Having already rejected Castro's Cuba and being rejected by the United States, they are still sloshing about Havana, helpless and hopeless, men and women truly without a country.

It is Castro, on the other hand, who — infuriated by the start-up of the Miami propaganda station Radio Martí — has disrupted an agreement reached with the Reagan Administration last year. Castro promised to take back the insane and criminals he had shipped out to Florida in 1979 and 1980; we promised to take in up to 20,000 anti-Castro Cubans a year. But the foolishness of Radio Martí continues; and so does the impasse.

Now Castro hopes to bolster his prestige in the West by a visit from the Pope next year. He attributes a softening in his attitude toward the church to a shift in the church's position as well as in his own.

"Broad segments" of the church "are now playing a progressive role," Castro observes. "I see a more constructive relationship between church and state now. We have moved from conflict in the early days through coexistence in recent years, to cooperation today."

So far, however, as a Cuban churchman puts it, "We've had signs but they're only signals." The "signals" include occasional favorable references to the church on radio, TV and in the press; promised efforts to wipe out

job discrimination against "believers"; and an easier dialogue between church officials and the soft-spoken, newly appointed Communist Party chief of religious affairs, who smilingly calls himself "an atheistic Christian."

"Many matters that in the past required energetic treatment," says this party official, "can now be dealt with in a more relaxed manner."

To a limited extent, the same is true of intellectual life. The works of a few prize-winning writers who have fallen into official disfavor (or jail) have reappeared after several years' blackout. The opening of a French cultural center in Havana will be a "first" for the Western democracies. So is a public exhibition in Havana's City Museum of American historical photographs of Cuba, privately arranged by a Minneapolis museum.

"Things are clearly easing up a bit," observes a European diplomat. "You see it in cultural life, in conversation in homes, even in the streets. It's surprising how many bright young people are coming up into high places in the Government, who aren't weighted down by old ideologies. True, this is a totalitarian society; but it won't necessarily always remain so."

The American embargo has seriously harmed the Cuban economy, but not enough to destroy Castro. On the contrary, it has robbed America of much of the influence that our economic power, our geographic position and our natural attraction to Cubans could exert. It has not helped remove the Soviet warships and Soviet freighters from Havana harbor. It has pushed Cuba, economically and politically, ever further into Soviet hands. It will never make the Cubans cry, "Uncle!" □